Historical turning points are not always recognised as such by contemporaries. Yet it was hard to miss the import of Xi Jinping’s address to the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017. Xi’s three-hour speech, the culmination of a congress that cleared the way for him to remain China’s ruler indefinitely, offered the most explicit statement to date that a rising China would no longer be content to hide its capabilities and bide its time. Xi declared that China was ready to ‘take centre stage in the world’ – to seek global influence commensurate with its growing power. He also argued that China now represented a successful alternative to the combination of liberal democracy and free markets espoused by the reigning superpower, the United States. Because China had achieved great prosperity and power through its model of authoritarian capitalism, it offered ‘a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence’.

Xi’s address, then, was not simply a declaration of geopolitical ambition. It was a reminder that modern great-power competition revolves around clashes of ideologies and systems of government no less than around clashes of national interests.

Today, it verges on cliché to observe that great-power competition is back – that resurgent rivalry between the most powerful states is once again a defining feature of global politics. After a period of historically
low geopolitical tensions, revisionist powers – namely, China and Russia – are increasingly testing the liberal international order created and led by the United States. From the Western Pacific to Eastern Europe, they are seeking to carve out privileged spheres of influence and dominate their strategic peripheries. They are contesting global ‘rules of the road’ such as freedom of navigation and non-aggression, and using tools ranging from inducement to intimidation to military coercion to make the international environment more receptive to their ambitions. They are competing for influence in pivotal countries and regions across Eurasia; they are probing the vulnerable peripheries of US power. As all this occurs, they are coming into progressively sharper rivalry with Washington and other defenders of the post-Second World War international system. Whether these intensifying rivalries will ultimately climax in great-power war is perhaps the central question of twenty-first-century geopolitics. But the era of deep great-power peace that followed the Cold War is undoubtedly over.

Less widely appreciated, however, is the extent to which ideological competition – tensions between the ideas around which societies organise themselves, and between the forms of government they adopt – is fuelling geopolitical competition. States are not interchangeable billiard balls, distinguishable only by the level of power they possess. The chief defender of the existing international order is a liberal democracy that has traditionally sought to shape the global environment in accordance with its ideological values as well as its strategic interests. The leading revisionists are autocracies that practise a distinctly authoritarian version of capitalism and see the advance of liberal ideals as an existential threat to their legitimacy and power. These divergent approaches to governance and society are never far from the surface in world politics. We may not be witnessing a new cold war, in which two diametrically opposed, universalistic ideologies square off in a contest to propagate themselves around the globe. But it is no coincidence that today’s sharpest geopolitical conflicts break down along ideological lines.

Admittedly, it may not always seem like ideology is at the forefront of great-power relations these days, as an American president openly expresses his admiration for dictators and disparages many of the liberal aspects of US grand strategy. And, as noted in the conclusion of this essay, Donald
Trump’s predilections and behaviour are often distinctly at odds with what might be thought of as an American liberal world view. Yet even at a time when his antics dominate the news cycle, it is important to remember that today’s great-power conflicts are not simply struggles between individual leaders who – in the American case, at least – will pass, in a relatively short time, from the scene. They are struggles between larger systems that are rooted in very different views of politics and geopolitics alike. Trump’s tendencies notwithstanding, that deeper conflict is likely to continue shaping great-power strife.

In fact, the competition between democracy and authoritarianism suffuses virtually every aspect of modern great-power rivalry. It feeds the antagonisms between America and its competitors by undermining trust, complicating compromise and fostering irreconcilable views of international order. It powerfully shapes the strategies that Russia and China are employing to reshape global politics. Finally, the differences between liberal and illiberal forms of government have profound implications for the strategic fitness and competence of the great powers – for their ability to compete effectively on the global stage. Carl von Clausewitz wrote that no good commander should embark on a war without comprehending its nature. As America gears up for an era of protracted geopolitical competition, it must first understand how duelling ideologies are shaping those rivalries.

**Ideology and geopolitics**

When we think of the role of ideology in great-power competition, we often think of the Cold War. The Cold War was a struggle for geopolitical influence, but it was equally a struggle between two antagonistic ideologies. Democratic capitalism and Marxism–Leninism not only entailed utterly conflicting views of politics, economics and society; they also made competing claims to universality. This clash of ideas dramatically exacerbated the clash of geopolitical interests between Washington and Moscow, intensifying the passion and conflict that infused the Cold War. ‘This is not a struggle for the supremacy of arms alone’, John F. Kennedy remarked. ‘It is also a struggle for supremacy between two conflicting ideologies: Freedom under God versus ruthless, godless tyranny.’
Measured against this standard, the ideological aspects of today’s great-power conflicts do pale by comparison. For one thing, the ideological gulf between the competitors is not nearly as vast, because both Russia and China have discarded socialist economics for a form of state-managed capitalism. For another, neither country has explicitly asserted, as communist ideology did, the desire to spread its form of government to the ends of the earth. Given these differences between past and present, one might easily conclude, as a number of observers have, that today’s geopolitical competitions are essentially non-ideological.8

Yet precisely because the Cold War was the very epitome of an ideological confrontation, this comparison misleads more than it informs. Throughout recorded history, even more ‘traditional’ geopolitical rivalries have been powerfully informed by ideology. In ancient Greece, ideological differences between Athens, a liberal, seagoing proto-democracy, and Sparta, a militarised, agrarian slave society, inflamed the tensions that led to the Peloponnesian War.9 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, divergent religious and political philosophies helped shape the conflict between a comparatively liberal, Protestant Dutch Republic and an absolutist, Catholic Spain. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the ideological and geopolitical challenges that an aggressive, revolutionary France posed to European stability went hand in hand.10 In the subsequent decades, one of the key geopolitical alignments of the post-Napoleonic era – the Holy Alliance – was cemented by a shared ideology of conservatism and monarchism in the face of rising threats from liberalism and revolution.11 In the 1930s and 1940s, ideological cleavages between the democracies and the fascist powers again helped determine the geopolitical line-up.12 Realists argue that states make decisions based on power and interests.13 Historians of great-power conflict might well reply that ideology inevitably influences how those interests are defined.

This should not be surprising, because few foreign-policy interests are more fundamental than the need to protect a country’s internal arrangements – its way of life – from external interference. ‘Definitions of national
interest in international affairs’, John Lewis Gaddis observes, ‘all seem to boil down … to the need to create an international environment conducive to the survival and prospering of the nation’s domestic institutions.’

Moreover, precisely because ideology shapes how people and nations view the world, it naturally colours assessments of threat and opportunity in the global arena. Countries do, of course, make ideological compromises. Nations with utterly opposing domestic systems have banded together when compelled by geopolitical necessity, the Grand Alliance during the Second World War or the Sino-American alignment of the 1970s and 1980s being two obvious examples. But generally speaking, ideological cleavages have pronounced geopolitical implications.

This point is relevant today because the ideological cleavages between America and its authoritarian challengers are more significant than is sometimes realised. There are, admittedly, myriad differences between the Russian and Chinese systems and the sets of ideas that underpin those systems. The world views of these countries and their leaders are informed by a vast array of factors including distinctive national histories, narratives, interests and cultures, and even the personal idiosyncrasies of their respective leaders. But just as these countries share a geopolitical antipathy to the liberal, US-led international system, they share a fundamentally illiberal approach to organising their societies.

Both Russia and China have deeply and increasingly authoritarian political systems that vest immense authority in a small elite headed by a paramount leader. Both countries lack free and fair elections and accountability under the rule of law, and both use repression and coercion – in addition to softer methods – to maintain control. Leaders of both countries stress the hostility of foreign influences and the dangers of contamination by liberal values to legitimise their repressive rule. In both countries, the political system has become progressively more personalistic in recent years, as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi have centralised power and constructed elaborate cults of personality. Both countries practise a version of authoritarian capitalism, in which market mechanisms are embraced but nonetheless managed – sometimes with a fairly heavy hand – by the state. And in both countries, the preservation of the ruling elite’s political power
is the fundamental theme linking all policy decisions. As Wang Qishan, one of China’s top leaders, said in 2017, ‘all President Xi Jinping’s key speeches over the past five years can be summarized with one message: ensuring the leading role of the Communist Party in all aspects of life’.17

For Russian and Chinese officials, moreover, authoritarianism is more than an approach to governing or a means of enriching a corrupt ruling class. It is an ideology in its own right – a distinctive way of looking at the world. Russian and Chinese leaders give every indication that they view authoritarianism as a superior method for organising society. They portray liberal political ideals as antithetical to the national strength and stability they aim to achieve. Putin has repeatedly touted his model of ‘sovereign democracy’ as an improvement over the political chaos, economic privation and geopolitical weakness of the 1990s.18 Xi has extolled China’s authoritarian capitalism as the path to prosperity and power, and he has described democracy as a flawed alternative that would bring social chaos, moral degradation and vast human suffering. At the Party Congress in 2017, notes one assessment, Xi ‘left no doubt that he regards China’s illiberal concepts of political and economic order as superior to so-called Western models, and that he seeks to export “Chinese wisdoms” to the world as a “contribution to mankind”’.19

Liberal democratic leaders believe the opposite. Liberal democracy entails a commitment to democratic procedures and forms, from free and fair elections to accountability under the rule of law. More fundamentally, it rests on a commitment to a set of key ideas: ‘a defense of individual liberties and property rights, an appeal to reason over custom, and a demand for government limited under law and based on the consent of the governed’, in addition to a preference for free-market economic approaches.20 Although Americans generally view themselves as pragmatic, non-ideological people, their commitment to liberal democracy thus is rooted in a series of strong, even revolutionary claims about the proper relationship between individuals and the state, and about what makes for a good and just society.

As Alexis de Tocqueville put it, the founding claim of the American experiment is that ‘the people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe. It is the cause and the end of all things;
everything rises out of it and is absorbed back into it.” Or, as national security advisor Anthony Lake explained in 1993, in asserting the connection between America’s democratic ideals and its foreign policy, “we see individuals as equally created with a God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So we trust in the equal wisdom of free individuals to protect those rights: through democracy, as the process for best meeting shared needs in the face of competing desires; and through markets as the process for best meeting private needs in a way that expands opportunity.” Democratic liberalism, in other words, is an ideology as powerful and encompassing as any other; it is not just a system of government but a coherent world view. The clash between that world view and the authoritarian ethos is at the heart of the strategic competitions under way.

**Why we can’t just get along**

The US competitions with Russia and China are often described as conflicts over geopolitical influence in key parts of the world, or as conflicts between an established power and its rising or resurgent challengers. Yet these descriptions tell only part of the story. A rising China might still challenge American interests in the Asia-Pacific and beyond if it were a democracy; a more liberal Russia might still aspire to pre-eminence within its near abroad. But the ideological divides between Washington and its rivals greatly intensify the diplomatic antagonisms between them. If Francis Fukuyama famously argued that ideological convergence was leading to the end of great-power conflict, today ideological divergence is once again fuelling geopolitical strife.

It is doing so, firstly, by ensuring an irreducible level of international distrust. The US government may cooperate with Russia or China on counter-terrorism or other issues, but most Americans nonetheless view authoritarian regimes with instinctive suspicion. Because autocracies do not derive their authority from the freely expressed consent of the governed, Americans often see them as illegitimate. Because autocracies repress their own citizens, believers in democracy naturally see those regimes as morally problematic, if not downright repugnant. “The perception by liberal states that non-liberal states are in a permanent state of aggression against
their own people’, writes Michael Doyle, is a potent source of hostility. Americans have also traditionally viewed autocracies as more aggressive and unpredictable than democracies: aggressive, because their coercive, illegitimate rule predisposes them to seek conflict and project their insecurities outward, and unpredictable, because a lack of transparency makes it hard to discern their intentions and capabilities. Roughly a century ago, Woodrow Wilson argued that authoritarians could never fully participate in a peaceful international society because ‘no autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants’. More recently, US leaders have drawn on these same ideas in openly advertising their desire to see the Russian and Chinese regimes replaced – someday, somehow – by more representative governments. ‘Don’t compromise on the basic elements of democracy’, vice president Joe Biden told Russian students in 2011. ‘You need not make that Faustian bargain.’

Authoritarian regimes amply reciprocate this hostility. Russian and Chinese leaders believe, not inaccurately, that the political concepts America espouses are inherently threatening to the regimes and societies they wish to construct. Putin has described Western-style liberalism as a decadent and morally corrupt philosophy that would throw Russia into degeneracy and upheaval. In speeches, he warns that the spread of democracy has led to the ‘growing spread of chaos’ in many countries, and that liberal tolerance has bred a mindless relativism that threatens Christian values. Chinese leaders, for their part, see democratic values as part of a Western tradition that ‘de-legitimizes and destabilizes regimes that espouse alternative ideas such as socialism and Asian-style developmental authoritarianism’, and that threatens to pollute their stable, illiberal polity. Moreover, Russian and Chinese leaders fully understand that Americans perceive autocratic regimes to be illegitimate and threatening, so they believe that America and other democratic powers will never leave them in peace.

‘Because China and the United States have longstanding conflicts over their different ideologies, social systems, and foreign policies’, one Chinese military document argued in the 1990s, ‘it will prove impossible to funda-
mentally improve Sino-US relations. For decades, Chinese officials have argued that Washington is pursuing a sinister campaign – a ‘smokeless World War III’, as Deng Xiaoping called it – to delegitimise and subvert the Chinese Communist Party. In Chinese parlance, this is referred to as the ‘peaceful evolution’ strategy, whereby the United States uses trade, cultural exchanges, human-rights advocacy and other non-military tools to promote liberal concepts and engineer the eventual replacement of the regime. Similarly, Russian officials have long alleged that Washington aims to weaken and ultimately overthrow the Putin-led government, through the encouragement of anti-regime dissidents, support for pro-democracy non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and efforts to pressure and delegitimise the Kremlin internationally. In 2013, Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov even argued that Western efforts to promote ‘colour revolutions’ in otherwise stable authoritarian states represented ‘the typical war of the twenty-first century’. These allegations exaggerate the degree to which the replacement of illiberal regimes represents a coherent US strategy, as opposed to a vague, long-term aspiration. Yet they testify to the inherent difficulty in achieving lasting accommodation between democratic and autocratic governments.

Exacerbating that difficulty is a second factor, which is that ideological differences raise barriers to diplomatic compromise. Were Russia and China liberal democracies, America might more readily yield to their desires for greater global influence, trusting that they would wield that influence responsibly. This was, after all, the calculation that British leaders made about the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a different scenario, one can imagine an authoritarian America cutting an explicit spheres-of-influence deal with Moscow in Eastern Europe, or Beijing in the Western Pacific.

Given the existing ideological alignments, however, such compromises are more difficult to contemplate. It might or might not be wise for US leaders to accede to a Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union, or to accept China’s subjugation of Taiwan and other countries along its periphery. Yet such concessions would be particularly painful because they would consign the people of those countries to the dominant influence of
oppressive, authoritarian regimes. ‘We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence’, Biden warned Russia in 2009. ‘It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances.’34 The projects of regional primacy that Russia and China are pursuing, the Trump administration agreed in its first ‘National Security Strategy’, are ‘antithetical to U.S. values and interests’ alike.35

Far from facilitating compromise, ideological differences predispose today’s authoritarian challengers to stoke diplomatic tensions for domestic benefit. Lacking organic legitimacy, the Chinese government works to manufacture it by fanning nationalism and hostility toward America and its democratic allies, including through educational curricula that stress China’s historical victimisation at the hands of rapacious foreign powers. ‘The Communist Party’, Susan Shirk observes, ‘has embraced nationalism as its new ideology in an age when almost nobody believes in communism anymore.’36 Putin, too, has hyped the threat of a democratic, domineering United States, allegedly set on spreading its values globally and destroying those countries that stand in its way. He has done so, in part, as a way of inspiring Russian nationalism and strengthening his own position amid growing disillusion with political repression and poor economic performance. As Marie Mendras puts it, ‘the West serves as the “useful foe” in the building of Russia’s closed, inward-looking and clannish system of rule’.37

All this relates to a third way in which ideological differences stoke geopolitical tensions – that is, by leading to radically different views of what sort of international order is just and desirable. America, as a liberal democracy, has long associated the advance of its political values with the advance of peace, prosperity and US influence. America’s ‘cherished goal’, proclaimed Bill Clinton in the 1990s, was a ‘more secure world where democracy and free markets know no borders’.38 And while Washington has made many ideological compromises over the generations, this idea has anchored some of the core aspects of America’s international behaviour: its efforts (inconsistent but nonetheless persistent) to promote democracy and human rights abroad, to build alliances and enduring partnerships with many of the world’s key democracies, to promote a rules-based system rooted in liberal norms and concepts, and to prevent any authoritarian power from achiev-
ing geopolitical dominance. In this and other ways, America’s commitment to democratic liberalism has underpinned its approach to global order.39

For Russia and China, however, this approach is undesirable and even dangerous. It threatens to deprive autocracies of international influence and legitimacy – to leave them, at best, as second-class citizens in a democratic world. At worst, it threatens to make them targets of pressure, containment, subversion and intimidation by democracies that are globally dominant. In a US-dominated liberal order, Vladimir Putin declared in 2007, ‘No one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them.’40 The Pax Americana, the state-run China Daily agreed in 2016, has been a ‘period of incessant warfare’ provoked by America’s continual ‘interference in the domestic affairs of countries’.41 What the autocrats seek is a different international order: one that tolerates ‘ideological diversity’, one in which the geopolitical and ideological power of America and other democracies is diluted, and one that is built not on liberal values but on protective legal norms such as non-intervention and absolute sovereignty.42 A stable system, Xi declared in 2015, must be based on an understanding that ‘the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries are inviolable and their internal affairs are not subjected to interference’.43

This is not some abstract theoretical dispute. This dispute, rather, has far-reaching implications for everyday diplomacy. It promotes vastly different views of events such as the colour revolutions in the former Soviet Union during the early 2000s. The US government and many Americans saw those upheavals as triumphs of democracy and moral progress; Kremlin officials saw them as CIA-backed plots that menaced Russian political stability. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine, writes Ivan Krastev, was ‘Russia’s 9/11’; Russian officials spoke ominously of an ‘Orange Plague’ that might sweep the post-Soviet space.44 This dispute also means that the United States will generally view powerful authoritarian countries as threats to the world it seeks to construct, and expect that those authoritarian countries will never fully accept such a world insofar as they have the power

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The Orange Revolution was ‘Russia’s 9/11’

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to challenge it. ‘China has long been alienated politically by the western world’, said Fu Ying, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China’s National People’s Congress, in 2016; it was therefore necessary to ‘re-shape the order structure’.45 As Minxin Pei explains, authoritarian regimes may profit economically from a liberal world order, but ‘a truly liberal-international worldview is inconceivable for a ruling elite steeped in realism and authoritarianism … Autocracies simply are incapable of practicing liberalism abroad while maintaining authoritarianism at home.’46 In that basic conflict lies a powerful source of today’s global tensions.

Making the world safe for authoritarianism
If ideological cleavages drive the growing tensions between America and its great-power competitors, they also shape the particular strategies Russia and China employ. As noted previously, the United States has long pursued an order-building project that is, in many respects, an outward projection of its domestic values: it has sought to shape a world in which democratic values and respect for human rights are widespread, and the democracies, led by Washington, are geopolitically supreme. The goal, said George W. Bush in 2002, is to forge a ‘balance of power that favors human freedom’.47 The authoritarian powers, by contrast, view that aspiration as highly pernicious. Russia opposes a ‘world in which there is one master, one sovereign’, Putin remarked in 2007; Chinese officials have long criticised America’s ‘hegemonism’ in geopolitical and ideological matters alike.48 Accordingly, these countries desire an international system that is more geopolitically balanced, less dominated by liberal values and more conducive to the survival and global power of their regimes. If the United States has long sought a world that is safe for democracy, the dictators are seeking a world made safe for authoritarianism. Ideological and geopolitical revisionism go hand in hand.49

Broadly speaking, in fact, much of what the Russian and Chinese governments do in foreign affairs is related to securing their domestic power. This is not the sole motivation for policy, of course: a great many factors, from long-standing narratives of national greatness to the blend of insecurity and ambition often found in great powers, are driving the Russian and Chinese challenges. Yet today’s authoritarian rulers intuitively perceive a symbiosis
between power and prestige in the world, and political stability at home. Strong, centralised rule, Chinese and Russian officials argue, is vital if their countries are to be influential and effective in foreign affairs. The stronger and more influential their countries are in foreign affairs, the more secure they will be against outside interference, and the better they can justify repressive rule to their own populations. In this sense, the increasingly assertive foreign policies Russia and China are implementing – their efforts to assert greater sway along their peripheries, to revise key global norms, and to project military might and other forms of power ever farther afield – are measures of domestic fortification as well. At the same time, Russia and China are also employing strategies more specifically tailored to making the international environment safe for their regimes.

Firstly, protecting autocracy begins at home, so both Russia and China are hardening their defences against an aggressive liberal world. ‘Hostile international forces have never abandoned the strategic intent of Westernizing and splitting us’, one guidebook for Chinese government and party officials stresses; vigilance and countermeasures are essential. In China and Russia, those countermeasures include strengthening military capabilities to guard against any potential physical attack. Both regimes have devoted substantial resources to building up and modernising their militaries, while also developing creative strategies and operational concepts – such as China’s ‘counter-intervention’ strategy and Russia’s ‘escalatory de-escalation’ doctrine – meant to deter or defeat US intervention. Yet because a direct military attack by the United States on the Russian or Chinese homeland remains unlikely, the primary manifestations of this strategy are in the political, ideological and economic realms.

Russia and China have intensified political repression in recent years, cracking down on political dissidents, human-rights activists, civil-society groups and other actors accused of embracing subversive liberal ideas. Restrictions on internet freedom and NGOs have tightened; censorship of political speech and virtually all media has increased. Both governments have sought to reduce the influence of foreign news sources and strengthen their information dominance at home. Both governments have redoubled ideological indoctrination, through school curricula, the use of state media
and other approaches that emphasise the virtues of the Russian and Chinese systems, and warn of the hostility and moral depravity of the liberal world. Finally, in China especially, the government is now harnessing technology to develop more advanced forms of political control, such as advanced facial-recognition capabilities that enable omnipresent policing, and a ‘social credit’ system through which the state will be better able to allocate or withhold benefits on the basis of an individual’s perceived political reliability.53

The economic dimensions of this strategy are equally important. Both Russia and China (particularly the latter) have reaped the benefits of international trade and investment provided, in no small part, by the open economic system America anchors.54 Yet Russian and Chinese leaders also understand that, in a world dominated by a liberal superpower and its allies, they risk being targeted with economic sanctions or other punishments in response to either their external behaviour or their treatment of their own citizens – as has indeed happened to both countries.55 Moreover, they know that they have limited ability to fall back on other sources of legitimacy if outside pressure impairs their ability to provide for the citizenry. Accordingly, even as both regimes have remained engaged in the international economy, they have sought greater resilience against economic pressure from abroad.

Under the banner of ‘sovereign democracy’, the Kremlin has encouraged Russian oligarchs to repatriate their money so they will be less vulnerable to asset freezes and other sanctions. Moscow also aims to reduce import dependence by encouraging domestic production of goods ranging from agricultural commodities to electronics, and its efforts to bring the former Soviet states into a Eurasian Economic Union represent a bid to decrease economic reliance on the European Union, thereby helping ‘preserve personalized rule in each state’.56 ‘We will work … more decisively to carry out transformation’, Putin announced after Russia was hit with Western sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. ‘Pressure from outside … will only consolidate our society, keep us alert and make us concentrate on our main development goals.’57

The Chinese face a more complex task, due to Beijing’s deeper and more profitable immersion in the global economy. But just as Deng Xiaoping warned, in commencing China’s economic reforms, that it was necessary
to keep out the flies even while letting in the fresh air, the government has taken steps to limit the exposure integration brings. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) have aggressively bought up foreign mines, oilfields and other sources of critical commodities and energy supplies; and they have purchased the infrastructure of global trade, from ports to railroads and shipping lines, to strengthen China’s control of its economic fate. Beijing’s Made in China 2025 project, which aims to make China dominant in an array of high-tech and other critical industries, is both a grab for economic and geopolitical dominance and a hedge against a potential US embargo or other measures that might expose Beijing’s dependence on imports of technology and other goods. Equally ambitiously, China is using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to assert greater control over global trade routes, including overland trading routes that will limit China’s vulnerability to maritime interdiction or other disruption by America and its allies. ‘China’s leaders are deeply concerned about the perceived legitimacy and prospects for survival of their entire regime’, writes Aaron Friedberg. They are ‘reluctant to entrust their careers, and possibly even their lives, to a global economic system … which they perceive still to be managed and controlled primarily by … the United States’.58

Russia and China are simultaneously seeking to improve the global outlook for authoritarianism via a second strategy: building regional spheres of influence in which autocracy is privileged and protected. The efforts of Moscow and Beijing to dominate their peripheries are well documented, and they feature an array of measures designed to roll back US influence and bend their neighbours to their geopolitical will: concerted military build-ups, campaigns of economic pressure and inducement, incremental coercion and information warfare, and other means.59 Admittedly, Russia and China would probably be attempting to shape their regions even if they were led by committed democrats. Yet just as America constructed its sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere in part to keep a hostile form of governance (in that case, monarchy) at bay, the sphere-building projects Russia and China are carrying out have a strong ideological flavour.
A principal reason Beijing desires preponderant influence in the Asia-Pacific is to decrease the danger of ‘ideological contagion’ from neighbouring democracies, to prevent those neighbours from ‘providing aid and comfort’ to anti-regime forces within China and to reduce the chances that regional states will participate in campaigns to punish Beijing for repressing its own population – as a democratic Japan did after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. In short, the farther democratic powers are pushed away from China’s frontiers, the more secure Beijing’s autocratic rulers will be. Creating a periphery populated by autocratic states will, in turn, make it less likely that neighbouring countries will ally with a democratic America.

China has thus offered a vision of a ‘harmonious Asia’ featuring a ‘political order shaped by Chinese political principles’. Similarly, Russia’s fear of strategic encroachment by NATO and the European Union has long been linked to its fear of ideological penetration by the liberal values those institutions espouse; ‘colour revolutions’ in Ukraine and Georgia were so threatening to Putin because he viewed them as sources of democratic contagion no less than footholds for Western geopolitical influence. ‘If Ukraine and Georgia could embrace liberal democracy and successfully become part of the West’, wrote Ronald Asmus in 2010, ‘the Russian ruling class’s narrative about its own “sovereign democracy” at home … might be exposed as hollow.’ As Russia and China have reached for mastery in their ‘near abroads’, then, they have emphasised creating regional conditions conducive to autocracy.

As part of its drive for influence in Central Asia, China has provided that region’s authoritarian states with military aid, expertise in the arts of repression and other assistance to head off feared political destabilisation. In Southeast Asia, Beijing has instructed Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and other countries on the Chinese experience of blending capitalist economics with authoritarian governance, and shared insights on how to use tools such as internet surveillance and regressive legal codes to monitor and stifle dissent. As Cambodia’s Hun Sen has pushed his country deeper into dictatorship in recent years, China has enhanced bilateral military and economic
ties. More broadly, observes Ely Ratner, BRI is meant not simply to create a China-centric ring of infrastructure and economic projects, but to foster an ‘illiberal regional order … in which democracy and individual rights are largely subservient to economic growth and social stability’. To this end, Beijing has often used BRI projects and other assistance to shore up friendly authoritarians, while also extracting policy concessions, such as support for China’s stance on the South China Sea. Finally, China’s authoritarian proclivities are evident in another aspect of its sphere-of-influence project: its hostility to an autonomous, democratic Taiwan. A major part of the threat Taiwan poses to China, write Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, ‘comes from Taiwan’s simply being what it is – a modern Chinese society that is economically prosperous and politically democratic’. For this reason, China’s campaign to undermine Taiwan is about isolating and delegitimising an ideological threat to the communist regime, as well as recovering a wayward province.

Russia is taking a similar tack in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Moscow has long bolstered the authoritarian regime in Belarus through military, economic and diplomatic support, on the theory, as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko once said, that ‘a revolution in Belarus is a revolution in Russia’. That assistance has been critical to Lukashenko’s political survival amid pressure from Washington and the EU; in 2005 he publicly thanked Moscow ‘for the immense support we received … in a very complex period of our history’. Putin has also undermined EU and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election-monitoring mechanisms, and supported authoritarian regimes in Central Asia; he has forged closer ties to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as Orbán’s drive to erect an ‘illiberal state’ has created conflict with the EU. The counterpart to protecting autocracy is preventing or simply undermining democracy: Moscow has used economic coercion, diplomatic pressure, propaganda, covert and paramilitary meddling, cyber attacks and other means to weaken or discredit democratic governments from Estonia to Georgia. The Russian regime has even used force to dismember unfriendly democratic states that seemed to be breaking away from Moscow, doing so in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Not least, Russian officials such as
Gerasimov have explicitly warned that Moscow will prevent any further colour revolutions in nearby countries, through military action if necessary. Russia, writes Thomas Ambrosio, is a quintessential “guardian” state – one which actively seeks to halt, resist, or contain democratization in order to preserve its autocratic political system.66

In some cases, Russia and China have cooperated in these endeavours. In 2005, Beijing and Moscow both pushed the Uzbek dictatorship to evict US military forces after the Bush administration criticised its penchant for bloody repression.67 Often working through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Beijing and Moscow have also pursued complementary or coordinated initiatives to insulate Central Asian regimes against political instability. These initiatives have included sharing intelligence on subversive threats, disseminating Russian and Chinese insights on ‘techniques of political control’, coordinating the forced repatriation of political exiles and dissidents, and providing military, economic and diplomatic support to friendly authoritarian governments. Additionally, the SCO has taken a strong public stand against democracy promotion and other measures that might ‘lead to disturbances and unrest’, and it has declared that information technology must not be used for ‘political purposes that … trigger social instability’68. China and Russia may be long-term rivals for influence in Central Asia. Currently, however, they have a shared interest in making sure this region – the strategic rear of both powers – remains hospitable to authoritarian rule.

Looking beyond their immediate regions, Russia and China employ a third and related strategy: supporting and enhancing cooperation with authoritarian regimes under pressure. Just as America feels safer in a world populated by democracies, autocrats believe that their own prospects for influence and survival will be enhanced if authoritarianism is prevalent. They believe that the ‘costs of suppression’ at home will be lower in a world in which more leaders are authoritarians and thus disinclined to punish that repression. They further judge that fellow authoritarians will not undermine their regimes or diminish their international prestige as democracies often do.69 They recognise that they are more likely to establish fruitful diplomatic relationships with other illiberal governments, and they fear that
the toppling of one dictator today may set a precedent that will be used against another autocrat tomorrow. As a result, Russian and Chinese efforts to cultivate and protect autocracies are increasingly global endeavours.

In the Middle East, Russia has strengthened cooperation with strongmen such as Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, acting as an alternative patron for regimes whose increasingly authoritarian bent has brought greater criticism from the West. In Latin America, Moscow has delivered economic and diplomatic backing for a repressive Venezuelan regime and provided arms and other aid to Daniel Ortega’s illiberal government in Nicaragua. These policies reflect geopolitical and economic motives, of course, and in many cases they have a distinctly transactional quality. Yet this does not mean they are ideologically neutral. These initiatives, write Eugene Rumer and Andrew Weiss, all involve ‘exploiting opportunities to undermine and hollow out the US-led international order, with its norms of economic openness, democratic accountability and the rule of law’.

China’s policies are having the same effect. ‘Pick a dictator anywhere on the globe’, James Mann has written, ‘and you’ll likely find these days that the Chinese regime is supporting him’. At various points, China has shielded authoritarian regimes in Myanmar, Zimbabwe and other countries from UN censure or sanctions. It has provided weapons, intelligence, trade, loans, investment and other support to autocrats in Angola, Guinea, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Sudan, Venezuela and Uzbekistan; it sold arms to Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi nearly up to the demise of his regime. In sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, China provides no-strings-attached trade, investment and loans, allowing dictators to elude Western pressure on corruption, human rights and other governance issues. Beijing has also bolstered authoritarian systems in any number of countries by educating officials on how to police the internet, repress dissent and build modern economies without opening their political systems, and by providing internet-control technology, facial-recognition software and other surveillance equipment. Not least, China furnishes ideological cover for authoritarian regimes by touting the accomplishments of illiberal
rule, arguing that democracy is not a universal value but a neo-colonial, Western imposition, and highlighting the chaos that has sometimes accompanied the breakdown of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and other regions. Xi and his advisers would argue that they are simply being respectful of national sovereignty and traditions, and China’s support for fellow autocrats can be just as transactional as Russia’s. But Chinese officials see the benefits of a more illiberal world, and their policies are promoting just that outcome.

Russia and China also work in concert to frustrate or delegitimise regime change against abusive authoritarian leaders. This tendency dates back at least to the 1990s. The NATO-led intervention against Libya in 2011 was merely the exception that reinforced the rule. Neither Beijing nor Moscow vetoed the UN Security Council resolution allowing the use of force to protect civilians from Gadhafi’s regime, but both regretted that forbearance once Washington and its allies used this resolution to prosecute a regime-change campaign that ended in Gadhafi’s murder. Russian leaders were particularly horrified by the prospect that Gadhafi’s overthrow might set a precedent for subsequent interventions. Putin said that the NATO campaign reminded him of ‘a medieval call to crusade’, while Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov vowed, ‘We will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future.’ That determination has subsequently been evident in the course of the Syrian civil war. Both Russia and China – along with another authoritarian revisionist, Iran – have worked to shore up Assad’s regime, through measures ranging from intelligence support and military training to full-on military intervention. Both countries have also assiduously opposed efforts to condemn, isolate and sanction Assad through the UN Security Council. Putin even used his 2015 address to the UN General Assembly to condemn America’s enthusiasm for the ‘export of revolutions’ in the Middle East, and to proclaim his determination to stand with the forces of order.

Supporting autocracies under strain relates to a fourth strategy, which involves reshaping international norms and institutions to make them friendlier to illiberal rule. Russian and Chinese leaders understand that ideas are power, and that the liberal ideas that characterise the US-led inter-
national system are prejudicial to their domestic and international standing. They equally understand that international institutions play an essential role in shaping debate and legitimising action. Accordingly, Moscow and Beijing are fostering an institutional and ideational climate that strengthens, rather than weakens, authoritarianism.

They are doing so in part by touting the benefits of their own systems. After the Cold War, it often appeared that liberal democracy was ascendant and unrivalled. More recently, however, democratic systems have often stumbled economically and socially, creating an opportunity for Russian and particularly Chinese officials to advance a different narrative. Kremlin officials argue that Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’ offers a better way of defending ‘traditional values’ such as Christianity and heterosexuality against the moral decay associated with liberalism, and of ensuring national prosperity, stability and independence after a decade of post-Cold War chaos, poverty and subservience. And although Russia’s lacklustre economic performance limits the resonance of this message, Chinese proselytism has been more impressive.

After the 2008 financial crisis, both Western and Chinese observers began arguing that the ‘Beijing Consensus’ – a mixture of state-directed capitalism and authoritarian political control – was displacing a Washington Consensus that had been badly tarnished. Chinese officials and intellectuals have since argued that Beijing’s experience offers a model for countries wishing to progress economically while preserving their ‘independence’ and traditions, and they have hammered home the idea that political liberalism leads to social instability and other ills. ‘China wishes to share its development experience and foreign philosophies with all countries’, one Chinese intellectual writes, to ‘rejuvenate’ other civilisations. The theme, writes Chinese foreign-affairs expert Wang Jisi, is that ‘China’s development model provides an alternative to Western democracy and experiences for other developing countries to learn from, while many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos.’ This message has been
conveyed through a variety of media, including state-controlled print, television and radio outlets with international reach. The long-term success of this programme remains to be seen, but Beijing’s economic record has already helped popularise a model of ‘state capitalism’ that seems ever more prevalent today.79

The flip side of this advocacy consists of efforts to limit foreign criticism of the Russian and Chinese models. Russia’s support for illiberal politicians and movements across Europe and America has multiple motives, but among them is the desire to empower ideological allies who will be less critical of Russia’s government and policies – or simply to tarnish Western democracies and thereby make their condemnations of Russian autocracy less credible.80 China has pursued an equally aggressive strategy for stymieing foreign critiques. After the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded its peace prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo, China reduced imports of fish from Norway by more than 50% and froze political relations with Oslo, one of many instances in which Beijing has economically or diplomatically punished countries that take ‘unfriendly’ positions on China’s internal practices. Beijing has similarly used the allure of investment, commerce and other economic rewards to purchase the silence of Greece, the Czech Republic and other European governments. Through these and other initiatives, the Chinese government aims to fortify ‘a deeply illiberal surveillance state at home while also exporting – or at least trying to popularise – its political and economic development model abroad’.81

These policies are part of a broader campaign to ‘illiberalise’ global norms and institutions. China has argued that existing international institutions, such as the UN and multilateral development banks, should be ‘regime-neutral’ – that they ought not opine or make decisions based on judgements about a country’s domestic institutions. To this end, China has also worked to prevent the UN Commission on Human Rights from singling out violators, and argued that discussions of such issues should be handled privately.82 Both Moscow and Beijing, moreover, have urged the
establishment of pro-authoritarian norms such as ‘internet sovereignty’ – the concept that governments should be able to police their national cyberspace much as they police their national territory or airspace – while also redefining ideas such as human rights and the responsibility to protect (R2P) in ways that make them less threatening. China’s concept of human rights emphasises poverty reduction and social stability, while Russia has reinterpreted R2P to legitimise interventions on behalf of Russians abroad, whether they desire such intervention or not. Not least, these countries have sought to delegitimise the actions of NGOs focused on democracy and human rights, by restricting their activities and access to foreign funding, and by depicting them as agents of liberal subversion. These efforts, writes Carl Gershman, are intended ‘to replace established norms contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants with alternative norms based on unrestricted state sovereignty and justifying harsh measures against political and ethnic dissidents’.

The same ethos guides Russian and Chinese moves to erect an alternative institutional order. The major authoritarian states, write Daniel Brumberg and Steven Heydemann, aim ‘to enhance mechanisms of authoritarian control and contain Western influence’, so they are working ‘to build regional and international institutions’ that serve these objectives. Chinese-led institutions such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRI have emerged as competitors of the existing web of international institutions and development banks led by the United States and other democratic countries. In the process, they have weakened the ability of the democracies to insist on political conditionality as the price of economic assistance, and they have established mechanisms for channelling resources to friendly authoritarian regimes. Russia is working, on a more limited basis, to use institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization to promote economic and security cooperation between authoritarian regimes.

As Russian and Chinese leaders promote authoritarianism, they are pursuing a fifth and parallel strategy meant to degrade democracy. ‘A creative strategist’, writes Bradford Lee, ‘ought to focus most intently on courses
of action that attack the enemy political system.’ Beijing and Moscow have taken this counsel to heart. Just as they accuse America of seeking to subvert their regimes, they are now pursuing systematic political-warfare campaigns meant to weaken, corrupt, delegitimise and distort the political systems of their democratic rivals.

Putin’s regime, notes Larry Diamond, has waged ‘an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy and bend it toward his interests, not just in some marginal, fragile places but at the very core of the liberal democratic order, Europe and the United States’. That campaign has featured tactics such as using fake and inflammatory information to exacerbate divisions within democratic states; providing media praise, financial support and other assistance to illiberal politicians on both the left and right; employing state-controlled media to critique liberal democracy and spread propaganda in the guise of news; and deploying cyber attacks and other methods to interfere with Western electoral processes. The US intelligence community concluded that Putin’s intervention in the US presidential campaign in 2016 was meant to ‘undermine public faith in the US democratic process’ and benefit an illiberal, pro-Russian Donald Trump. It also ignited a ferocious and debilitating political controversy within America that persists today. More broadly, these efforts have the intention and, where successful, the effect of manipulating and discrediting liberal democracies, thereby making them less geopolitically effective and less willing or able to effectively criticise autocracy. In undertaking these efforts, moreover, the Russian regime is using the same tools and methods – disinformation, cyber attacks and cyber harassment, manipulation of the media, suborning corruption among political actors – it employed to empower autocracy within Russia itself.

China is also waging political warfare, although its efforts are only starting to receive the same level of attention. In countries throughout the Asia-Pacific, and also in the United States and Europe, Beijing has used nominally independent front organisations to disseminate pro-Chinese propaganda; employed financial largesse, access and other incentives to reward (or punish) academics, politicians, media outlets and business leaders based on their treatment of China; and utilised the increasingly
global reach of Chinese-language news media to spread favoured narratives. It has influenced the agendas of foreign universities through economic pressure and the sponsorship of Confucius Institutes and other pro-Beijing organisations, as well as by having Chinese students abroad keep tabs on one another as a way of limiting free and open debate. It has even engaged in bribery of politicians and officials in countries such as Australia, as part of what one Chinese official has called a ‘structured effort to infiltrate’ democratic systems, and it is now aping Russian tactics by employing ‘troll farms’ and bot-driven computational propaganda to pollute online discourse, particularly in Asia.94

As these examples indicate, Chinese political warfare includes targeted efforts (such as bribery) meant to produce specific policy outcomes (a ‘friendlier’ position on China’s activities in the South China Sea, say), as well as broader efforts to shape the overall political environment. And while such ‘influence operations’ are part and parcel of global politics, what makes these activities more ominous is that they exploit the openness of democratic societies and distort debate in countries that depend on a free marketplace of ideas. This approach has been labelled ‘sharp power’, a form of influence which ‘helps authoritarian regimes coerce and manipulate opinion abroad’.95 For Beijing as well as Moscow, political warfare represents a way of attacking rivals’ political systems at their weakest points, and it exploits the democratic disillusion – the declining faith in democratic systems to deliver the economic and social goods – that is plaguing many Western societies today.96

All of these efforts relate to a sixth and final strategy Russian and Chinese leaders are employing: strengthening ties between their two regimes. Russia and China have historically been adversaries far more often than allies. That pattern may reassert itself in the future, because ambitious, continent-sized powers that share long borders often find it difficult to get along, and because growing Chinese power could easily threaten Russian interests from Siberia to Central Asia and beyond. In the near and medium terms, however, Russia and China share a formidable animus toward an international system based on liberal values and US hegemony, and they know cooperation is essential in challenging a
powerful Western coalition seen as both geopolitically and ideologically hostile. ‘At a state level’, writes James Palmer, ‘authoritarianism seems to be the best glue of Sino-Russian friendship.’

As a result, Russia and China have been enhancing their bilateral relations across an array of issues, including energy sales, development of military technology, and opposing additional US military deployments in sensitive areas such as the Korean Peninsula. They have lent each other diplomatic support or simply avoided isolating each other on controversial diplomatic issues, such as Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Their navies have conducted joint manoeuvres in the South China Sea, the Mediterranean and the Baltic, and their militaries have participated in multilateral exercises in Central Asia. As we have seen, moreover, Moscow and Beijing have taken numerous steps – whether explicitly cooperative or simply mutually reinforcing – to strengthen autocrats and stave off democratic regime change from Syria to Central Asia and beyond; they have exchanged best practices on how to contain liberalising influences within their own countries; and they have touted their common identity as illiberal powers. Russian officials have studied China’s success in marryng prosperity with political repression and announced their intention to learn from China’s ‘expertise in Internet management’, while China awarded its Confucius Peace Prize in 2011 to Putin, lauding his ‘iron hand and toughness’. ‘Despite their historic rivalries’, writes Ambrosio, Russia and China have forged a strategic partnership aimed at resisting ‘an American-dominated international system which stresses the desirability of furthering the spread of democracy’.

In this and other respects, Russia and China are not simply conducting geopolitical campaigns to shift the global balance of power. They are waging ideological campaigns to shift the global balance between authoritarianism and democracy as well. Ideology also suffuses the competition between America and its rivals in one final way: by influencing the competitive fitness of the participants – that is, their strengths and weaknesses in protracted geopolitical struggle.
Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict

Systems check

Competition between America and its challengers is, in the final analysis, a test of systems – an audit of whose political–economic model is best placed to generate resources, craft sound policies and act effectively on the global stage. Ideological differences have as profound an impact here as in any aspect of contemporary geopolitics. For centuries, many observers – even admirers of democratic rule – have believed that democracies are poorly suited to the imperatives of global policy. ‘Foreign politics demand scarcely any of those qualities which are peculiar to a democracy’, de Tocqueville wrote; ‘they require, on the contrary, the perfect use of almost all those in which it is deficient’. Contrarily, more recent scholarship indicates that democracies may actually outperform the authoritarian competition. On balance, the autocratic qualities of the countries testing the US-led order do provide them with certain near-term advantages in conducting statecraft. Yet over the long term, those same qualities also make it difficult to match a democratic superpower’s enduring strengths.

Consider the advantages of illiberal rule. The centralised, non-transparent nature of authoritarianism allows dictators to practise some of the darker arts of statecraft with greater facility than most democracies. Moscow has repeatedly shown that it can move with greater speed and secrecy than Washington: it can launch a surprise attack on Ukraine or deploy forces unexpectedly to Syria, whereas the open and deliberative nature of the American system makes it far harder to arrive at, let alone conceal, major strategic decisions. Similarly, Russia and China are freer to use disinformation and dishonesty than are democracies encumbered by legal constraints, a free press and separation of powers; and they can use the sophisticated propaganda capabilities and media controls of a modern autocratic state to convey a more coherent message; they can more readily suborn corruption or partner with criminal groups, patriotic hackers and other dubious proxies.

Autocracy comes with additional blessings. Authoritarian rulers can employ covert action, or simply deny their involvement in activities such as the destabilisation of Ukraine, employment of mercenaries in Syria or use of quasi-autonomous maritime militias in the South China Sea, to a degree
that would be more difficult for a democracy. Finally, authoritarian regimes have traditionally had a freer hand to mobilise resources, combine the elements of national power, unify bureaucracy and pursue a coherent policy with minimal interference from state or society. ‘Decision, activity, secrecy, and despatch will generally characterize the proceedings of one man in a much more eminent degree than the proceedings of any greater number’, wrote Alexander Hamilton; ‘and in proportion as the number is increased, these qualities will be diminished.’

The dictator’s advantages are not merely theoretical; they have recently been on display. As Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris argue, the Chinese government has leveraged its control over the Chinese economy to mount a coordinated geo-economic campaign America can only envy. Beijing has employed China’s SOEs as agents of corporate espionage, technology acquisition and Chinese state influence. China’s SOEs, Xi declared in 2016, should ‘become important forces to implement’ Communist Party decisions and ‘enhance overall national power’. At government behest, SOEs have secured access to critical oil supplies by paying above-market rates to purchase equity in African state energy firms; they have rewarded countries that sever ties with Taiwan; they have built artificial islands, drilled for oil in disputed waters and otherwise staked Beijing’s South China Sea claims. The government also uses its influence over trade and investment flows to reward friends and punish enemies, as when Chinese companies ceased shipments of rare earth metals to Japan following a maritime dispute, or when Chinese SOEs froze new investments in Vietnam in 2014 amid a flare-up in the South China Sea.

The contrast with US policy is striking. In 2011, Chinese SOEs contracted to buy 30 Brazilian Embraer jets just as Hu Jintao, then the Chinese president, launched a bid to enhance Chinese–Brazilian relations. Notes Edward Luttwak, ‘that is not the sort of gift that the US government, or Japan’s, could or would give – All Nippon or United would not obediently line up to buy diplomatically preferred aircraft, and announce their purchase exactly on the diplomatically preferred date’. Quite the opposite: when the Obama administration sought to enhance economic ties with Indonesia as part of its Asia pivot, its appeals for US companies to invest there fell
More broadly, whereas Beijing has resourced and implemented its major geo-economic initiatives – AIIB, BRI and others – with comparative steadiness in recent years, US foreign economic policy has gyrated wildly due to the vicissitudes of American politics. US diplomats spent years negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership with numerous allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific, only for Washington to withdraw from the pact when the political winds changed and Trump took office.

Consider also the example of political warfare. It is a mistake to think that only authoritarian regimes can wage political warfare, or that only democracies are vulnerable thereto. Yet Russia’s recent efforts to manipulate political processes and influence foreign societies have nonetheless underscored certain asymmetries between liberal and illiberal systems. Russian political warfare against the United States and other countries has featured sophisticated, synchronised operations that merge activities across diplomatic, economic, informational, intelligence, paramilitary and other realms; that utilise the full media and propaganda apparatus of an illiberal state; that adeptly blend truth and falsehood; that employ a broad mixture of state and non-state actors, from intelligence officials to internet trolls to quasi-official news media; and that are often shrouded in ambiguity and denial. These qualities, concludes the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, are directly related to ‘the organizational character of authoritarian regimes’. As one former Russian diplomat quipped, ‘We engage in foreign policy the way we engage in war, with every means, every weapon, every drop of blood.’ Meanwhile, the openness of US democracy arguably left America particularly vulnerable to Russian attacks in 2016. As Moises Naim writes, those attacks exploited ‘the free flow of information in a democratic society, the effect of that information on public opinion, and the electoral mechanisms through which public opinion determines a country’s leadership’.

An authoritarian edge has been manifest in other areas as well. China has used its growing wealth and centralised rule to make potentially transformative investments in critical future technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), and to achieve a level of coordination between government and the
tech industry that Washington has been unable even to approach. ‘US tech firms will have the advantage if the race to develop AI depends mainly on experimentation and innovation in multiple areas at once’, Ian Bremmer writes. ‘But China is the better bet to win if the decisive factor is depth of commitment to a single goal and the depth of pockets in pursuing it.’

Beijing is also wagering that its political model will allow it to better withstand the pain of any trade war with America, because an authoritarian government can more easily shore up affected companies and redistribute resources, while also manipulating the accessible US political system to target economic interests in the states of key US legislators. Overall, the apparent purpose and coherence of Russian and Chinese policies seem to compare favourably with American gridlock, confusion and disarray. China has been skilfully conducting a coercive campaign in the South China Sea and implementing geo-economic projects with the potential to reshape the strategic landscape of Eurasia; Russia has waged operationally successful wars in Ukraine and Syria, and re-established itself as a global player. The United States, meanwhile, has been failing at tasks as mundane as passing annual budget resolutions to fund the Defense Department, and suffering from the politically induced whipsawing of policy on issues from climate change to arms control.

Regime type matters, then, and to the extent that strategic rivalry hinges on the ability to make and execute decisions quickly, exploit secrecy and surprise, remain committed to a single long-term objective and operate in the shadows or outside of democratic legal norms, the authoritarians may indeed have the edge. Yet it is still wrong to conclude that fractious, easily distracted democracies cannot compete with more committed, cohesive autocracies. For the asymmetries between liberal and illiberal regimes cut both ways, and America’s democratic character gives it significant longer-term advantages.

The bulk of the historical and social-science literature suggests that, over time, democracies are better than autocracies at a panoply of critical strategic tasks: generating economic resources, developing and employing capable militaries, winning allies and building soft power, exerting influence without generating massive global resistance, and sustaining competent decision-making. All of this has traditionally made for a pow-
erful, often decisive, edge in protracted competition. ‘In every prolonged conflict in modern history’, observe Kenneth Schultz and Barry Weingast, ‘such [liberal] states have prevailed over their illiberal rivals’. Social science offers only probabilistic findings, of course, and past performance is no guarantee of future results. But there are reasons to think that these factors will have an effect in today’s competitions as well.

Firstly, nearly everything we know about economic growth suggests that all regimes are not created equal: democracies consistently outperform autocracies in building the wealth that is essential to strategic success. This is because democratic rule fosters the free exchange of information, stable legal and regulatory frameworks, and individual and property rights that help unleash investment, entrepreneurship and innovation. Additionally, precisely because power is decentralised in democracies, they are better able to avoid rash economic decisions – such as Mao’s Great Leap Forward – that can have disastrous consequences. And because democracies are accountable to the citizenry, they provide the ‘relatively equal access to economic resources to a broad cross-section of society’ that fosters broad-based growth. Finally, democracies can more easily obtain resources and finance economic expansion through borrowing, because they are seen as comparatively trustworthy debtors. ‘It is no accident’, Mancur Olson wrote, ‘that the countries that have reached the highest level of economic performance across generations are all stable democracies.’

China is currently testing this historical law; Russia, a classically corrupt and stagnant autocracy, is not. Yet, as Olson also observed, although ‘experience shows that relatively poor countries can grow extraordinarily rapidly’ under enlightened autocratic leadership, ‘such growth lasts only for the ruling span of one or two dictators’. Today, Chinese growth has clearly been slowing for at least a decade, and leading experts assess that the country is confronting quintessential authoritarian pathologies that will jeopardise its continued ascent.

In China’s education system, says Odd Arne Wested, ‘conformist mediocrity is rewarded above unsettling brilliance’, especially in areas deemed
politically sensitive. Similarly, the dominant characteristics of China’s system—strict political controls, censorship and repression—obstruct top-flight innovation. Factors such as corruption, patronage, factionalism, a fear of social instability and the power of entrenched interests impede reforms needed to further liberalise the economy. ‘Until and unless China relaxes its draconian political controls’, writes David Shambaugh, ‘it will never become an innovative society and a “knowledge economy”’. Not least, the vast size and power of the same SOEs that so benefit Chinese diplomacy limit competition and distort the domestic economy. The regime’s unwillingness to take politically risky steps, such as promoting greater transparency, liberalising capital flows and enshrining stronger individual and property rights, further inhibits China’s potential. To the extent that the Chinese political system is evolving today, in fact, it is moving toward greater authoritarianism, information control, ideological conformity and other economically unhealthy characteristics. America, by contrast, has enjoyed only modest growth rates since the Great Recession. But taking the longer view, it benefits from all the advantages traditionally associated with stable democracies: the ability to borrow at extremely low rates, an open intellectual climate and world-class educational system, respect for individual rights, the rule of law and other factors. What, precisely, this means for the future balance of economic power and growth between Washington and Beijing is impossible to say, given all the other variables involved and the fact that the two countries are still at very different stages of development. But generally speaking, the contrast in systems seems likely to favour the United States.

The same seems true in a second key area: developing and wielding military power. As Paul Kennedy argued in *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, ‘a combination of economic laissez-faire, political and military pluralism, and intellectual liberty’ has traditionally underwritten both economic and military dominance. Admittedly, authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany have sometimes achieved very high levels of military effectiveness and innovation, but on balance history and social science suggest that democracies do better at waging and winning wars. In part, this may be because democracies are simply choosier in the conflicts they fight, given
that democratic leaders will face electoral trouble should they start a war and lose. Yet it is also because professional, civilian-controlled militaries tend to perform at a higher level than politicised, corrupt authoritarian armies, and because democratic militaries are generally more comfortable with delegating authority, permitting operational initiative and flexibility, and fostering relatively free flows of information, all of which are crucial to conducting war. Indeed, for all the strategic travails the United States has encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades, the American military has shown extremely high levels of combat effectiveness in these and other recent conflicts, in part for these very reasons.

The Russian military, for its part, has developed niches of excellence that have allowed it to perform well in limited conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, and it would be a formidable foe in a ‘home-field’ fight with the United States and NATO in the Baltic region. Yet Russia is still no match for America’s overall military strength, not simply because of resource limitations, but also because large portions of the force continue to suffer from corruption, organisational bloat, low morale and other pathologies common to authoritarian regimes. Likewise, China’s military modernisation has been remarkable in many respects. But its efforts to develop forces fully capable of dominating information-age warfare are likely to ‘be hampered by the highly centralized, hierarchical structures of China’s military, which [do] not emphasize either delegation or flexibility’. A RAND Corporation report concludes that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is also ‘riddled with corruption’ and weakened by the pervasive influence of political commissars and other manifestations of the PLA’s subservience to the Communist Party. Finally, although PLA responsibilities for internal security are no longer as taxing as they were under Mao, they continue to consume resources and otherwise act as a ‘domestic drag’ on the ability to conduct overseas missions. Xi is now making a determined effort to overcome many of these obstacles, and the Chinese military has made real progress in certain respects. But achieving the truly superior performance Beijing seeks may require confronting the ingrained characteristics of authoritarian rule.

Military effectiveness is closely related to a third aspect of democratic dominance: establishing and maintaining alliances. Here, the attributes that
define the internal behaviour of authoritarian states – coercion, inflexibility, intolerance of dissent, lack of respect for minority rights – have historically repulsed more partners than they attract. The Soviet Union, for instance, did assemble an alliance bloc during the Cold War, but those relationships were based on compulsion and fell apart the moment Moscow relaxed its iron grip. Democracies are better able to cultivate and keep allies, because the habits of democratic governance – traditions of compromise and tolerance, respect for minority rights and the rule of law – lend themselves to more organic, durable partnerships characterised by strong cooperation and mutual respect.\textsuperscript{132} This contrast is one of the major reasons the United States has dozens of allies and close geopolitical partners, which include most of the richest and most technologically advanced countries in the world.\textsuperscript{133} Those few allies and genuine partners Beijing and Moscow possess tend to be relatively weak and isolated authoritarian regimes. One has only to observe how powerfully America’s allies magnify its own strength – militarily, economically, diplomatically and otherwise – to see what a massive advantage this asymmetry provides.\textsuperscript{134}

With respect to a fourth key competency – generating soft power – the issue is more complicated. Many analysts and US policymakers believe that leading democracies have inherent soft-power advantages, because their political model naturally appeals to the aspirations for freedom and liberty of people around the world.\textsuperscript{135} Yet if a corrupt, autocratic Russian regime has generated little international admiration outside of fellow authoritarians, China has developed considerable prestige and esteem due to its rapid growth. (A historical parallel would be the way rapid Soviet industrialisation generated significant soft power in the developing regions during the Cold War.) Additionally, America has been depleting its international respect with alarming rapidity under Trump’s abrasive, erratic leadership, raising questions about who has the soft-power edge after all.\textsuperscript{136}

Just as Soviet prestige tended to dissipate once people in the developing regions and elsewhere became better acquainted with the nature of the Soviet system, however, China confronts real limits in sustaining its
own soft power. Hu declared in 2007 that China ‘must … enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country’, but the cultural dimensions of Chinese soft power remain comparatively weak.\(^{137}\) China’s soft power is inherently tenuous, in fact, because it hinges almost entirely on economic performance, rather than any broad global desire to emulate a Chinese police state in which individual freedoms are severely circumscribed. As Chinese academic Yan Xuetong has observed, ‘an increase in wealth can raise China’s power status but it does not necessarily enable China to become a country respected by others, because a political superpower that puts wealth as its highest national interest may bring disaster rather than blessings to other countries.’\(^{138}\)

One suspects this is why, as recently as 2016, respondents in only two countries surveyed in the Asia-Pacific and Europe had a majority positive view of China, and overwhelming majorities in nearly every country surveyed had a negative view of Beijing’s respect for individual freedoms.\(^{139}\) For years, Beijing has suffered repeated soft-power setbacks as a result of its authoritarian rule, such as the fallout it experienced following Chinese repression in Tibet in 2008, or after its sharp diplomatic reaction to Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Prize in 2010. American soft power, dissimilarly, has historically been extremely resilient, because over the long term it attaches more to what the country is – an inclusive democracy whose system is founded on the dignity of the individual – than to any particular president.\(^{140}\) At the very least, then, the United States and China possess very different types of soft power as a result of their opposing political models, and one suspects that America’s democratic version will ultimately prove stronger and more enduring.

These third and fourth asymmetries are linked tightly to a fifth, which is that democracies are normally better suited than autocracies to building vast international power without generating vast international resistance. It stands to reason that authoritarians wield great global power coercively and exploitatively, because that is how they wield power at home. ‘The characteristics of [Communist Party] governance inside China include intolerance of criticism, limited respect for civil and political human rights and the rule of law, little accountability of the state to society, and nontransparency in
decision making’, Denny Roy writes. ‘Reflected in China’s international relations, these characteristics generate friction with other countries, especially the liberal democracies in the Asia-Pacific.’ The fact that America embraces liberal ideals and has a political system based on the consent of the governed, in contrast, seems to provide some degree of reassurance – now supported by decades of experience – that it will pursue a more consensual, less nakedly aggressive primacy.

One can easily see this dynamic at work in the way that many of Russia’s and China’s neighbours – those countries most exposed to Russian and Chinese power – are seeking greater US engagement to counter that power. The reason for this, as Zachary Selden notes, is that the US-led system, ‘built on generally liberal principles, is designed to support relatively free trade, adherence to a rules-based economic order, and a general respect for national sovereignty. There is no certainty that the order that would come with the rise to regional predominance of illiberal states such as Russia and China would be nearly as beneficial to the broad interests of secondary states.’ According to one estimate, in fact, 100 of the world’s 150 largest states lean towards America, with only 21 leaning against it. The US-led liberal order has proven so attractive to many countries precisely because it is based on America’s liberal values; an illiberal order would surely engender more unease and resistance.

Sixthly and finally, although authoritarians can move with enviable speed and decisiveness, democracies may be better at decision-making over the long term. The qualities that make democratic decision-making infuriatingly slow and messy – checks and balances, alternation in power, vicious public debate – also lend themselves to reasoned deliberation and the ability to make course corrections when necessary. The things that make authoritarians enviably quick and decisive – centralisation of authority, empowerment of a small elite, the stifling of debate – can also lend themselves to big mistakes. History is replete with examples of tyrants who made horrific blunders because the nature of their rule allowed them to take decisions emotionally or illogically, distorted or
closed off information flows, weakened accountability, or simply meant that their subordinates were too terrified to challenge them.\textsuperscript{144} Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill both had plenty of bad ideas during the Second World War, but Churchill’s advisers were able to argue with and dissuade him in a way that Hitler’s advisers weren’t.

Neither Russia nor China has so far replicated the epic miscalculations of Hitler, Stalin or Mao. Yet the weaknesses of autocratic decision-making have become more evident as both the Russian and Chinese regimes have become more illiberal. Putin’s blindness to growing domestic opposition in 2011–12, which erupted in major public protests surrounding his return to the presidency, occurred, as Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill observe, because ‘he seemed to live in a bubble of his own propaganda’.\textsuperscript{145} In the same vein, Putin apparently decided to invade Ukraine in 2014 alone, with minimal consultation or diplomatic planning beforehand. That process allowed the operation to unfold quickly and with maximum surprise, but it also ensured that Putin did not adequately anticipate the ensuing economic, diplomatic and military blowback.\textsuperscript{146} In China, Xi’s centralisation of power is weakening the guardrails on individual decision-making put in place after Mao’s death, and it has overturned the term limits that previously required turnover at the top. These changes will enable Xi to move more expeditiously, but they may also render Chinese decision-making more vulnerable to group-think, sycophantism, unforced errors and other authoritarian diseases. As Francis Fukuyama writes, solving what the Chinese call the ‘bad emperor problem’ and other challenges associated with arbitrary rule ultimately requires increasing ‘the formal procedural constraints on the state’.\textsuperscript{147} Both Russia and China, however, are moving in the opposite direction, with potentially significant risks for their competitive fitness.

To be sure, ideology is not destiny. A wise leader may mitigate the drawbacks associated with her system of government; a foolish leader may squander the benefits associated with his. Luck, contingency and other factors will play critical roles in determining who comes out ahead in the end. As great-power rivalry unfolds in the coming years, however, it appears certain that the nature of the contending democratic and authoritarian systems will influence their competitive virtues and vices. And although
it may seem, at first glance, that the dictators have the upper hand in the world of statecraft, over the longer term a democratic superpower may have the greater structural advantages after all.

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Ideology has gotten a bad name in US foreign policy in recent years, because it is often taken to signify a dogmatic adherence to faith in the face of reality, or a commitment to dangerous, moralistic crusades. What would be truly dangerous, however, would be to ignore the unmistakable ideological content of contemporary great-power rivalry. America’s competitions with Russia and China are not dry, value-free affairs. They are infused with the ideas, values and proclivities that flow from the opposing systems of the competitors. Grasping how ideological differences sharpen geopolitical antagonisms, shape great-power strategies and influence the competitive strengths and weaknesses of America and its rivals is thus critical to accurately assessing the global challenges the United States confronts. It also highlights four additional points American policymakers should keep in mind.

Firstly, a focus on ideology reminds us that the stakes of today’s competitions are even higher than they might initially seem. The US–China and US–Russia rivalries would be deadly serious if they concerned ‘only’ the future balance of power and influence. Yet they have equally fundamental ramifications for the future ideological balance between democracy and autocracy, liberalism and illiberalism. It is no coincidence that the global advance of democracy seems to have stalled, and perhaps gone into reverse, at a time when resurgent authoritarian powers are challenging a global order founded on America’s liberal precepts. Insofar as Russia and China succeed in further revising that order, they will bring about a world that is not just less amenable to US influence, but one that is less hospitable to democratic values. That, in turn, could trigger a vicious cycle: a world in which democracy is weaker might also be a world in which it is harder for a liberal superpower to rally global opposition to the depredations of illiberal rivals. The present competitions concern the fate of ideas as well as the
fate of nations. To recognise that fact is to engage not in melodrama but in simple realism.

Secondly, understanding the ideological components of great-power rivalry helps dispel certain illusions about the ease of resolving those conflicts. Academics and certain policymakers – including President Trump – have proposed various ‘grand bargains’ that would dramatically reduce tensions between Washington and its challengers by clearing away certain geopolitical disputes that divide them. Let us leave aside, for a moment, whether it would be wise to trade away Taiwan in hopes of gaining Chinese restraint elsewhere, or to abandon Ukraine with an eye to purchasing Russian cooperation on other issues. Leave aside, also, whether such bargains would stay struck or simply encourage further revisionism. The fact remains that today’s competitions are so fraught because they are not simply about clashing desires for geopolitical influence, but about contradictory conceptions of governance, political values, even morality. They involve fundamental questions about what sort of nations America, Russia and China are, and what kind of world their political nature leads them to envision. History suggests that such conflicts tend to be protracted and inherently difficult to resolve. This is certainly not to say that competitions with Russia and China are struggles to the death, or that shrewd negotiation has no role to play in managing tensions and even forging select areas of cooperation. But it is a reminder that competitions combining geopolitical tensions with ideological conflict often frustrate efforts at transcendent diplomacy.

Thirdly, if there is a pronounced ideological dimension of great-power competition, then there should be a pronounced ideological component of American strategy. US rivals are pushing for advantage in the political and ideological spheres; to refrain from answering in kind would be a form of unilateral disarmament. Limits are important here: ideological competition need not entail actively promoting regime change in Russia or China, and there is room for debate on precisely how forward-leaning the United States should be – and what tactics it should embrace or eschew – in the ideological realm. Yet the robust defence and promotion of democratic values abroad should be a key part of any comprehensive effort to shore up the
liberal international order against illiberal Russian and Chinese challenges. The United States might also explore, with appropriate caution and prudence, whether there are ways of manipulating the domestic weaknesses of the Russian and Chinese systems for geopolitical advantage, just as Moscow and Beijing are doing to Washington today, and just as America did against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Indeed, if today’s competitions are as encompassing as recent US policy statements indicate, fighting back on all fronts would seem warranted.\textsuperscript{152}

Finally, all of these considerations reinforce the overriding strategic imperative that America remain true to the better angels of its nature. All things being equal, the United States is likely to enjoy great long-term advantages in today’s strategic competitions simply by virtue of being a liberal democracy. Yet all things are not equal right now, because at the presidential level, the United States seems to be practising an extraordinarily abrasive, illiberal diplomacy that is eroding its alliances, spending down its soft power and causing many international observers to wonder whether American leadership is still less threatening than the alternatives.

So far, the other elements of the American foreign-policy apparatus have done a decent job of containing the damage. The US president clearly disdains America’s democratic allies, for instance, but day-to-day cooperation remains quite robust. Trump openly praises dictators, but his Treasury Department has employed sanctions meant to punish human-rights violators fairly vigorously.\textsuperscript{153} And as this quiet campaign to contain the president indicates, some of the most troubling aspects of Trump’s diplomacy appear to have more to do with the particular personal qualities of the president than with deeper structural shifts in the way the United States approaches foreign policy.\textsuperscript{154} It seems unlikely, then, that Trump’s presidency – as diplomatically destructive as it has been – represents a permanent move toward a strategically illiberal America. Yet Trump’s behaviour nonetheless illuminates the fact that individuals and individual policy choices still matter in the larger clash between rival systems.
Trump’s approach does not represent ‘smart’ or ‘tough’ diplomacy. It is not what the ‘National Security Strategy’ claims – a more competitive and effective approach to great-power relations. The president’s conduct, rather, is a recipe for devaluing many of the assets that have traditionally benefited a democratic superpower, and thereby weakening America’s strategic competitiveness for as long as Trump’s ethos persists. At the outset of another great-power competition, George Kennan argued that the most important thing America could do was to ‘measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation’. It was good advice then, and it is good advice now.

Notes

2 Iran is sometimes included in the list of revisionists threatening the US-led order. But by virtually any standard, Iran is not nearly in the same power-political league as China or even Russia.
6 In this essay, I use ‘autocracy’ and ‘authoritarianism’ as synonyms. The United States is technically a ‘liberal democracy’, but for convenience I often use ‘democracy’ as shorthand when describing the US political system. ‘Liberalism’ and ‘illiberalism’ are also used as imperfect but convenient shorthand for the approaches to governance and society taken by the United States, on one hand, and its authoritarian challengers, on the other.

8 See, for example, Lind, ‘Cold War II’.

9 Victor Davis Hanson, A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 13.

10 David Bell, The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).


21 Ibid., pp. 16–17.


See Hill and Gaddy, Mr. Putin, pp. 260–1; Robert Nalbandov, Not by Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy under Putin (Lincoln, NE: University Press of Nebraska, 2016), pp. 163–5; and Wright, All Measures Short of War, p. 46.


As discussed subsequently, Russia and China have become increasingly willing to violate the sovereignty of their neighbours and rivals in recent years. Nonetheless, they have insisted that their own sovereignty must remain inviolate. Such hypocrisy is hardly unusual among great powers, authoritarian or democratic.


Minxin Pei, ‘Assertive Pragmatism: China’s Economic Rise and Its Impact on Chinese Foreign Policy’, IFRI Security Studies Department,
Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict


49 A similar formulation has been offered by Larry Diamond in ‘Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy’, Atlantic, 9 December 2016; and by Friedberg in A Contest for Supremacy.


54 As discussed below, Russia’s access to the global economy has been constricted since the imposition of Ukraine-related sanctions by the West in 2014.

55 Russia has been subject to human-rights-related US sanctions since the enactment of the Magnitsky Act in 2012 (in addition to Ukraine-related sanctions since 2014). China was hit with US and international economic restrictions following the Tiananmen Square massacre.


57 Putin, ‘Remarks at Meeting of the
Valdai International Discussion Club’.


Heath, ‘What Does China Want?’.


Nathan and Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, p. 213.


69 The phrase comes from H. Yilmaz, ‘External–Internal Linkages in Democratization: Developing an Open Model of Democratic Change’, *Democratization*, vol. 9, no. 2, September 2002, pp. 67–84. There are exceptions. The Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s saw two totalitarian regimes seeking to undermine each other ideologically and diplomatically, and even coming to the brink of war. Yet as a general proposition, the idea that today’s authoritarians feel less threatened by authoritarians than by democratic regimes seems to hold.


Nathan, ‘China’s Challenge’, p. 34.


Diamond, ‘Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy’.


Mahnken, Babbage and Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*.

Shekhovtsov, ‘The Challenge of Russia’s Anti-Western Information Warfare’.


See ‘For Russia and China, Cooperation Is the Name of the Game in Central Asia’, *Stratfor*, 9 March 2018; Sam LaGrone, ‘China, Russia Kick Off Joint South China Sea Naval Exercise; Includes “Island Seizing” Drill’, US Naval Institute, 12


China, too, has a rich tradition of deception and surprise attack, which is ‘entirely consistent with the character of its current domestic regime’. Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, p. 43. The US military is, of course, capable of achieving tactical surprise. But America cannot so easily achieve the sort of strategic surprise of which authoritarian regimes are capable.


Quote from Levesque, ‘China’s Evolving Economic Statecraft’. See also Blackwill and Harris, War by Other Means, esp. p. 107; ‘China Blocked Exports of Rare Earth Metals to Japan, Traders Claim’, Daily Telegraph, 24 September 2014; Kurlantzick, State Capitalism, pp. 204–8; Halper, Beijing Consensus, p. 104. Russia has used its SOEs, such as the state oil company Gazprom, for similar purposes. See Robert Donaldson, Joseph Nogee and Vidya Nadkarni, The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 150–2, 178–9.


The United States has a tradition of political-warfare and covert-action initiatives – sometimes successful, sometimes not – dating back generations. The Soviet Union, for its part, proved vulnerable in the later years of the Cold War to a Western political-warfare offensive emphasising human-rights issues.

Mahnken, Babbage and Yoshihara, Countering Comprehensive Coercion, p. 6.


Olson, ‘Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development’, p. 572.


131 Nathan and Scobell, China’s Search for Security, p. 299.

132 See John Lewis Gaddis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).


137 Nathan and Scobell, China’s Search for Security, p. 321.


143 Joseph Nye, ‘Trump Has Learned a Lot. But He’s Neglecting a Huge Part


145 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 239.


150 It is noteworthy that the ‘grand bargain’ most commonly cited as an example of great-power reconciliation – the rapprochement between the United States and the United Kingdom during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – occurred between two relatively liberal powers. Similarly, the rapprochement between post-Napoleonic France and its former enemies in the late 1810s rested, at least in part, on shared ideological support for monarchy and opposition to revolution. The rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War was not really a reconciliation between equals: it occurred because Moscow essentially gave up the game, and started transforming itself internally to boot.

151 This dynamic has, somewhat ironically, been confirmed by the inability of President Trump to engineer a rapprochement with Moscow. An unusually illiberal American president may want detente with the Kremlin, but few other actors in the US political system do.


154 See Frank Newport, ‘Trump’s Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion’, Gallup, 12 July 2018. To be clear, this is not to say that Americans are as committed to an assertive internationalism as they traditionally have been since the Second World War – an issue about which there has been, quite justifiably, much concern. It is simply to say that the more illiberal aspects of Trump’s foreign policy have not proven widely popular with

155 X (George Kennan), ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 4, July 1947, p. 582.